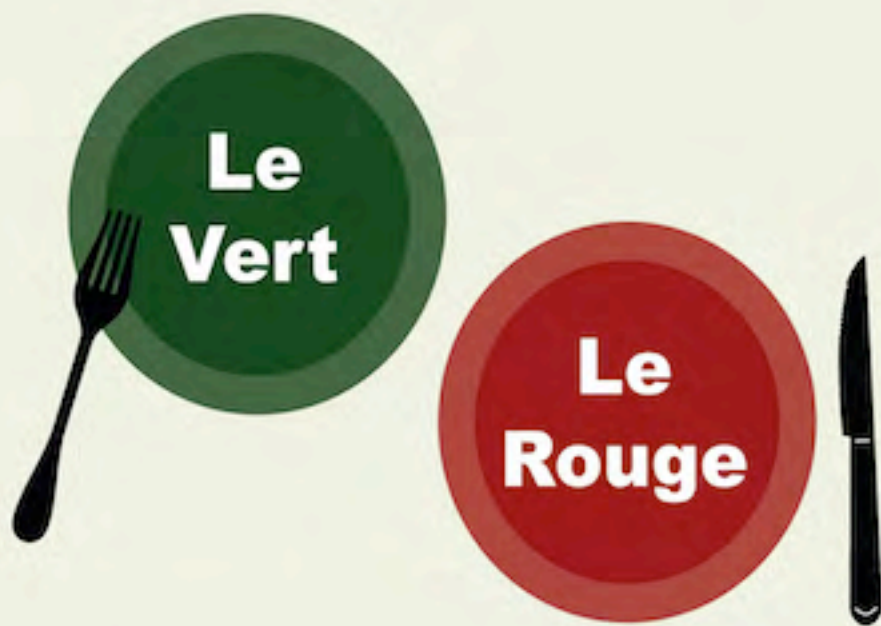




The Green and the Red



A Novel by Armand Chauvel

Translated by Elisabeth Lyman



One

Léa scanned the menu desperately in search of an escape route. She'd come to Paris for the day expecting to meet with her high school classmate at the bank where he worked. Instead, he'd suggested they discuss her request over lunch at a traditional brasserie on Boulevard Saint-Germain.

There was a pizza on the menu, but the prospect of picking out all the bits of ham by hand didn't hold much appeal. It was a relief, then, when she spotted a goat-cheese salad among the starters.

"We're out of goat cheese," the waiter told her.

She bit her lip and looked back down at the menu. The lunch service was in full swing, and her old classmate, whom she hadn't seen for ages, had ordered a steak and was now devouring their complimentary basket of potato chips. At length, she made her choice.

"I'll have the mixed-greens salad with ham and crudités, but without the ham." The waiter raised an eyebrow, then went away, leaving her face-to-face with Jean-Claude's silk tie and questioning look. "Uh ... I'm allergic to ham," she

mumbled, embarrassed.

Were there any known cases of ham allergy? Perhaps not, but it was only a partial lie. Ham truly disgusted her, especially now that she had a pet miniature pig named Charline. Jean-Claude, who was gifted with neither tact nor perceptiveness, began describing his boundless passion for Iberian acorn-fed ham, a delicacy he treated himself to every time he went to Spain.

“You should put that on your menu! It’d be a hit.”

Visions of pigs’ legs hanging in an outdoor market came to Léa’s mind. Maybe it was because the way they were lined up made her think of chorus girls in a music-hall show, but after a while they’d started to look like human legs to her. But Léa’s trouble with meat had begun much earlier. When she was ten, her grandparents had given her a baby chick. She raised it lovingly until the day her father, noticing her charge’s robust health and thick plumage, transformed it into a chicken potpie. Although she’d seemed to have gotten over this early trauma fairly quickly, the incident had left its mark.

Jean-Claude looked her straight in the eye. “To be honest, I never would’ve imagined you as a restaurant owner. Or living way out in Rennes.”

Nobody would have imagined her as a restaurant owner (or chef—she was also the one working the stove). A brilliant student, she’d graduated from high school with honors at the age of sixteen. That was when things had gotten a bit messed up: She began fine arts studies, but it took her four years to realize that art wasn’t her true calling. She found herself unemployed and without a degree, much to her parents’ dismay. Jean-Claude was only assuming what everyone else had—that she’d botched things up. Another handful of chips went down the hatch.

“An organic restaurant, too!” he added, giving her a strange look.

He could disparage organic food all he liked, she thought, as long as he didn't catch on to the rest. She now regretted not lying outright and describing La Dame Verte as a restaurant serving traditional fare. Thanks to her ridiculous scruples, she now found herself on thin ice. At stake was a loan of fifteen thousand euros—a crucial amount if she was to stay in business.

The waiter appeared with the steak and salad. “Since you didn't want ham, we gave you tuna.”

“Huh?” She paled but immediately grasped that if she didn't want to give herself away, she had only a half-second to recover. “Well, then! Thank you very much.”

She began to imagine how surprised Jean-Claude would be—and the chain of events that would ensue—if, heaven forbid, she were to leave the fish untouched.

Another allergy?

Actually, I'm a vegetarian.

Ve—vegetarian?

At that point, the jig would be up, and she could forget about the loan. What bank would be crazy enough to finance a vegetarian restaurant? And even imagining that Jean-Claude were an open-minded, eco-conscious, new-age banker, she wouldn't be able to avoid that same tired old line of questioning.

Ah! But I thought vegetarians ate fish.

Nope.

Not even teeny tiny mini-shrimp?

Have you ever seen fish growing in a garden? she would retort, ignoring his attempt to annoy her. Or seafood sprouting from tree branches?

From the way he beamed as he carved up his steak, it was clear that Jean-Claude was a die-hard carnivore. *But what about some nice foie gras sautéed with chanterelle mushrooms?* he would probably say next, in the discussion playing out in

Léa's mind. *Or baked duck with olives? Or stewed rabbit? Not even a roast chicken?*

The argument that would follow might vary slightly in the details, but it would generally go something like this: He would ask if she had any nutritional deficiencies, and she would say no, she was very healthy. He would reply okay, fine, but people have been eating meat since prehistoric times, and without meat in our diet, our brain would never have reached its current size. She would inform him that it was not the eating of meat but the invention of cooking—which increased the energy we could extract from food and thus freed us from constantly searching for calories—that led our brains to grow bigger than those of our ape-like ancestors. Try reading a few science magazines, she would add.

He would get worked up and protest that humans were at the top of the food chain. She would tell him that this idea wouldn't have convinced the early Christian martyrs in the lion's dens. He would assert that like any other animal, man was a predator and had the right to take his prey. She would compliment him for placing people on the same level as animals; after all, did we not share 98.7 percent of our genetic code with the bonobo and 95 percent with the pig?

This comparison of human and non-human animals would irritate Jean-Claude even further. He would accuse her and her ilk of preventing people from enjoying their food with their moralizing talk about animal suffering. Anyway, could she show him scientific proof that it doesn't hurt carrots to pull them out of the ground? She would challenge him to locate the carrot's central nervous system—he could win a Nobel Prize! He would ask what she would do if her plane crashed in the Andes mountains and all she had to eat was a can of pork and beans. Vegetarianism wasn't a religion, she would reply—just a life choice—and she wouldn't refuse to make an exception if extreme circumstances warranted it. She

would then point out that the meat industry was destroying the environment. He would call her an extremist and claim that she cared more about battery hens than starving children. Showering him with facts and figures, she would establish the direct connection between the meat industry, the over-exploitation of agricultural resources, and world hunger.

Finally, out of arguments, Jean-Claude would go back to nutritional deficiencies and say that vegetarians had low sex drives because they didn't get enough vitamins. Yes, she would agree, they were all pale, anemic and impotent—just look at the hundreds of millions of vegetarians living in India. Exasperated, he would remind her that Hitler didn't eat meat. Correct, just like Tolstoy, Leonardo de Vinci, and Einstein, she would counter. He would accuse her of being under the influence of a guru and continue along those lines until she stood up and smacked him on the face. It didn't take much sometimes.

She stuck her fork into a piece of tuna, which was undoubtedly contaminated with mercury. In any case, from her long experience, she knew that nobody gave up meat just because of a conversation. There had to be a certain predisposition, plus a triggering event or lucky coincidence. As with Paul McCartney, who was eating lamb one day when he looked out the window and saw some young sheep capering around in a meadow. But that wasn't all. In Léa's view, vegetarianism was to food what love was to sex. The same relationship existed between a greasy hamburger and a terrine of grilled vegetables with arugula pesto and grilled almonds as between a porno movie and *Romeo and Juliet*. Would Jean-Claude agree? His plate looked like a battlefield. A mound of green beans had resisted all attacks from his fork, while some distance away, a piece of bone and a few chunks of fat lay in a pool of blood. She half-expected him to order steak tartare for dessert. And she wondered what he would think if he were

to try the rice-milk, white almond butter, and medjool date panna cotta she served at La Dame Verte. Most people had no idea of the nutritional benefits or exquisite flavors vegetarian cuisine had to offer. The catch was that if Jean-Claude ever came to her restaurant, he would see how empty it was, and ... good-bye, fifteen thousand euros. No—she needed to be patient, clever, and tolerant. And then, wiping the red juice from his lips with a napkin, Jean-Claude really went and did it.

“Nice and rare, just the way I like it. Seriously, I don’t understand those vegetarians. Gotta be stupid.”

Two

Was Mathieu in love with Astrid Nedelec, or was it just a case of strong sexual attraction? He had just answered the fourteen questions of the True Love Test, which he'd found in a magazine, and the result seemed incontestable.

I would be deeply despondent if she left me. Hard to say, since they hadn't yet slept together, but he supposed so. On a scale of one to nine, he'd give this a five.

I sometimes feel I am obsessed with her; I can't think of anything else. Yes, he was obsessed with her, but more physically than otherwise. Three out of nine.

Making her happy brings me joy. He liked working with her, but no, he wouldn't get up at night to get her a hot-water bottle. Two out of nine.

I would rather spend my time with her than with anyone else. Of course—at least in Rennes, where he didn't know anyone. Three out of nine.

I'd be jealous if I thought she was interested in someone else. Nine out of nine. He was still a human being with feelings, after all.

I long to know everything about her. Let's not get carried away. She was intelligent, but not very imaginative or interested in many things. Three out of nine.

I desire her in every way—physically, emotionally, and mentally. Physically, yes; emotionally, yes; but only because of his involuntary solitude. And mentally? He didn't get it. Again, three out of nine.

I have an endless need for affection from her. Chéri, his grandmother's Chihuahua, came to mind as someone who had an endless need for affection. Two out of nine.

She is the perfect romantic partner for me. The word *romantic* made him uncomfortable. And anyway, he couldn't answer until he had slept with her. For now he would put five out of nine.

I feel my body responding when I'm close to her. Nine out of nine—physically, Astrid was his type. Just shaking her hand put him in quite a state.

She's constantly on my mind. By playing with the words a bit, he could have put nine out of nine, since work was always on his mind, and the two—his work and Astrid—were inextricably linked, but that would have skewed the results. Two out of nine.

I want her to know everything about me—my thoughts, fears, and desires. Yikes! A slippery slope that could lead to marriage. One out of nine.

I eagerly look for signs of her desire for me. He wasn't looking for anything, but he was quite pleased by the obvious interest she showed. He was even pretty sure that she'd left her ex because of him. Five out of nine.

I become very depressed when there's a problem in my relationship with her. He wasn't a sociopath, so as a matter of course, he preferred to maintain a good relationship with everyone. Five out of nine. That made a total of fifty-seven points. Even adding ten points to make up for the cynicism

inherent to the male condition, he was still far from the maximum score of 126.

A jolting of the train shook him from his thoughts, and he noticed that they were approaching Montparnasse station. The first-class car was full of top executives from Rennes who, like him, were traveling to Paris for the biannual international food innovation trade fair. Mathieu tried to imagine how they would rate on the True Love Test and wondered how they would react if he were to speak to them about his problem with women. Problem? He went to the restroom to freshen up. In the mirror he saw a man with broad shoulders, dark hair, brown eyes, and a large and slightly crooked nose—the kind of imperfection, he thought, that distinguishes you from ordinary mortals. He was brimming with testosterone and, despite having always had an active sex life, he'd never had the slightest technical difficulty in bed. And Astrid Nedelec, the communications director and daughter of the big boss, was infatuated with him. So ... what problem?

Jean-Sylvain, Astrid's cousin, had already arrived at the Nedelec Pork stand and was briefing the stand attendants. That's the trouble with family businesses, Mathieu thought. The roles aren't well defined, and a young and inexperienced financial officer can stick his nose anywhere he wants. Mathieu sighed and went over to shake his hand.

"I'm looking for Astrid," he said.

"She's late again," replied Jean-Sylvain coldly.

Was it because of his great height that this moron looked down on everyone? Jean-Sylvain didn't have so much to be proud of, Mathieu thought. His main strong point—the only one, in fact—was his ability to pinch pennies. Exhibit A: the jackets that were too short for him and the abominable cheap colognes he was always drenched in. In any case, Mathieu had no desire to spend any more time than necessary with this rookie.

Mathieu went off to explore the aisles of the trade fair. The competition had outdone itself this year: sprayable olive oil, squirtable cheese, wine jellies, deer-testicle chewing gum, Tex-Mex tripe, morel mushroom butter, and other amazing things. One thing was sure—he loved the agrifoods industry. It was a dynamic and innovative sector, and he was a highly imaginative workaholic. When he'd left Paris to become category manager at Nedelec Pork in Rennes, the company was producing only fresh sausage, smoked and unsmoked ham, andouille sausage, dried sausage, and traditional white sausage. Excellent products but a bit outdated, and distributed without any real strategy. In his first six months there, Mathieu had boosted sales in large and medium-sized supermarkets and, trespassing on the previous marketing director's territory, proposed the creation of a garlic-flavored cocktail sausage. And bingo! The cocktail sausage was a hit at stores all over France. Fabrizia, the marketing director, was thanked and shown the door. Mathieu was given her job and the never-ending resentment of Jean-Sylvain, who'd had almost as much of a crush on the pretty Italian woman as he did. He thought back wistfully to Fabrizia's devastating smile, her high-heeled boots, and the rivalry between them that did not preclude a certain attraction.

His cell phone rang, putting an end to his reverie.

"Hello, Mathieu!" The silky voice belonged to Astrid. Her meeting at Bill & Burton, their PR agency, was likely to take longer than expected, and a crew from the local news station would be stopping at their stand at eleven o'clock to film a short segment. She didn't know if she would get there in time. "Would it make you nervous to be on camera?" she asked.

"Are you kidding? My backup career plan was to become a game-show host."

She broke out laughing. "You men and your delusions of grandeur!" Then she took on a more serious tone. "But

you have to be careful, you know. This isn't *Questions for a Champion*. The media can be real sadists sometimes."

"Don't you worry about a thing."

"Okay, great. If I'm not there in time, marketing gets interviewed and no one else."

He could have kissed her. What she meant was that Jean-Sylvain, the cousin that she cherished almost as much as he did, was not to be allowed near the microphone. Mathieu headed back toward the stand, whistling a little tune, but stopped in his tracks when he caught sight of Auguste Nedelec's colossal frame towering over the crowd. Oh, no! What was Astrid's dad doing there? Wasn't he supposed to be taking a week off because of his health problems?

"Astrid will be furious, but I couldn't resist. I jumped on the first train," Auguste announced with a jovial smile that thrust his wide chin forward.

Mathieu realized the interview had just slipped through his fingers. Damn it! Not to mention the additional market share the chief executive officer was about to make them lose. Although he had masterfully transformed a modest butcher shop in downtown Rennes into a prosperous family business, he wasn't exactly a stellar spokesperson. Mathieu nevertheless felt affection for this self-made man, workaholic, and ... his future father-in-law? He admired the patriarch, who had gotten his start as an apprentice pork butcher at age thirteen, for remaining down-to-earth even after becoming head of the company. Between meetings, for example, Auguste liked to pop into the cutting room, an eight-inch knife in hand, and carve up a few carcasses. But the mere thought of Auguste meeting his mother's second husband, a very buttoned-down CEO of a yogurt multinational, made Mathieu cringe.

The France 3 television crew arrived at eleven o'clock, and the reporter began her interview with a predictable enough question.

“What new products will you be unveiling at this year’s show?”

Auguste puffed up with pride. “After the very successful launch of our garlic cocktail sausage, we’re competing for the Industry Gold Award with a new product that I think will create quite a stir: a wild-berry sausage.”

Mathieu lamented not being in Auguste’s place. Like the cocktail sausage, the wild-berry sausage was *his* baby. He’d had the idea upon returning home from his summer vacation and finding nothing in the kitchen but an old piece of sausage and a package of frozen blueberries. With this new product, he hoped to oust Jean-Sylvain from his place as the company’s unofficial number two.

Monopolizing the microphone, Auguste was now saying that thanks to its integrated livestock operations, Nedelec Pork was one of the few firms in the sector that could guarantee full traceability for its products. Knowing how eager journalists could be for sensationalism, Mathieu foresaw an incident of some kind. The next question removed all doubt.

“What do you say to those who accuse livestock farmers of spreading swine flu, mistreating animals, and contaminating the groundwater?”

Blood rushed to the CEO’s cheeks. When he spoke, his booming voice acquired a few more decibels. “First of all, who’s suggesting such claptrap?”

“Environmental groups, animal welfare activists, vegetarians—”

“Vegetarians!” shouted Auguste.

“Yes, people who refuse to eat meat.” The reporter looked ready to dodge a physical assault.

“I know who they are!” Auguste’s face blazed fiery red. At this moment, he looked as if he would gladly have shredded this impudent hussy’s stomach and intestines into ribbons, pickled them, and stuffed them into casing made from her

own behind. Mathieu could see this as clearly as he could predict the old man's imminent catastrophic gaffe. And his sixth sense did not fail him.

"Listen, no carrot-munching ayatollahs are going to tell us what to do!" And he thrust a finger toward some visitors sampling meat products at his stand. "Look at these people. Are they murderers? Dangerous criminals? Do I look like a criminal to you, little lady?"

Carrot-munching ayatollahs—now he'd really done it.

Before moving to Rennes, Mathieu hadn't had any special opinion of vegetarians. At best, he'd viewed them as little green men from another galaxy with indecipherable intentions. But after seeing them on TV blocking the paths of trucks transporting hogs to slaughter here in the region of Brittany, he'd become aware of the danger they presented. Malnourished and aggressive hippies, clearly in some sort of sect, knowing no limits in their efforts to convert the world to herbivorism. But to say as much on TV—Auguste had clearly lost his marbles.

Three

At La Dame Verte, chandeliers made out of metal wheels adorned with wooden spoons lit up a dining room empty of customers but full of round tables and freshly repainted chairs. On the counter, an old cash register, restored at great expense, provided a retro touch.

Léa shivered in the cold air of the dining room. She dropped her purse on the floor, poured herself a glass of wine, and sighed. To think that she'd hoped to find a customer, at least one, dining here tonight! What an idiot she was.

She'd tried to give La Dame Verte a unique kind of décor, combining vintage and recycled items. But how ugly these placemats made from old corks were, when you really looked at them. As for the set of copper saucepans hanging from the bicycle wheels on the ceiling—where had she gotten such an absurd idea? Why hadn't she followed the lead of most vegetarian restaurants, which usually opted either for incense-perfumed Indian themes, or a horticultural look with nightmarishly large fruit and vegetable moldings?

True, her kitchen equipment would have inspired envy in a chef of a three-star restaurant, but her eyes had been bigger than her stomach. The custom-built oven, industrial bain-marie unit, and electric tilting kettle had swallowed up half of her savings by themselves. She had enough utensils and cake molds to meet the needs of a dinner rush at the fanciest Parisian restaurant. Another mistake was the costly granite work surface. Why hadn't she opted for Carrara marble from Tuscany while she was at it?

She pushed the kitchen door open and was annoyed to see a young woman in an apron sitting in a corner, a tub of potatoes at her feet. Very pale in complexion, her red hair twisted into a bun and secured with a silver, dolphin-shaped barrette, she was lost in a magazine article.

"Hi, Pervenche. What're you reading?"

"An interview with David Lynch about transcendental meditation."

"Ah." In that case, the potatoes can certainly wait, thought Léa, forcing herself not to make the remark out loud. "Aren't you going to ask me how it went in Paris?"

"You didn't even say why you were going."

"I didn't? Sorry. It was to ask for a loan."

"And?"

"And ... next time I go to a bank, it'll be to rob it." She thought back to Jean-Claude's face when, instead of smacking it, she had treated him to her usual long-winded speech on vegetarianism.

"*Annica*," replied Pervenche. That was her favorite word. In Pali, an ancient language of India, it meant that everything is impermanent, ephemeral.

"Yes, I should keep things in perspective. After all, I could have fallen out of the TGV at one hundred fifty miles an hour, but I didn't."

A bubbling sound and a pleasant aroma of spices emanated

from a stock pot on the stove. Léa leaned over to smell it, then fished out a ball of grayish matter and tasted it.

“Don’t you think it needs a little more carob flour?”

“Listen, I’ve agreed to cook that stuff, but don’t count on me to eat it.”

You’d think I asked her to make rabbit fricassee or veal tenderloin, Léa thought irritably, doing her best to open her chakras. This “stuff,” as Pervenche called it, was made from tofu, wheat gluten, almonds, celery, and other completely plant-based ingredients. Léa had had the idea the previous night, in one of the creative flashes that sometimes came to her when she couldn’t sleep. She’d calculated that putting imitation meat like this sausage on her menu would bring in more customers. But Pervenche, of course, was against it. Honestly, she didn’t know why she’d hired that girl. Sure, she accepted the pitifully low wages, but under her placid exterior she had real problems with authority and would drag her feet whenever Léa asked her to do the slightest thing. In the language of psychology, she was passive-aggressive—in other words, the nightmare of any business owner. As for Pervenche’s dietary ideology, she was more skeptical of Léa’s menu than even a regular omnivore would be. The idea of a tofu “sausage,” seitan “steak,” or vegetarian “kebabs” bothered her because of the reference to what she called not “meat” but “animal cadavers.” Since humans had been gatherers before becoming hunters, Pervenche considered imitation meat products as unbearable dictates, an encouragement of what she saw as the “ideology of meat as a necessity.”

Léa added the carob flour herself, then asked coldly, “Where’s Charline?” Charline, her miniature pig, was Léa’s closest friend for two hundred miles.

“She’s upstairs sleeping,” replied Pervenche.

“Did you give her those bottles I left in the fridge?”

“Of course,” replied Pervenche, looking at her

reproachfully. “Although I don’t understand how you can give her cow’s milk!”

A sudden desire to drive a Hummer, smoke Cuban cigars, and add T-bone steaks to the restaurant’s menu came over Léa. She couldn’t resist. “If you know of a sow willing to donate some milk, let me know. Someone in your family surely has one?”

Pervenche’s face turned pale. She flung off her apron and stormed out of the room. Weighed down with disappointment, fatigue, and now remorse, Léa turned off the burner and went up to her apartment above the restaurant.

Her dream had always been to live in a vintage setting, and she’d definitely gotten what she wanted. Both the furniture and the moths were antique. A smell of dank, humid wood and mildew hung about in the hallway. The floorboards tended to come unglued, and she would soon be able to admire the landscape with the window shutters closed, thanks to the growing cracks in the wall. In the office, her laptop computer sat on a trestle table, surrounded by recipes and loose sheets of paper on which she scribbled ideas for new dishes and other thoughts. The bedroom, painted blue, smelled of lavender and the bohemian life. A jogging outfit was collecting dust on a hanger behind the door, and a Jamie Oliver cookbook, *Rock’n Roll Cuisine*, lay on the nightstand. Two bookshelves—one full of novels, the other art history books—occupied part of the wall, and an abstract painting by her mother filled the space above the bed. Every time she contemplated this remarkable work of art, she felt a kind of support, an encouragement to keep on going.

She finally found Charline in the bathroom drinking water from a basin she’d placed under the leaking toilet tank. Although a member of the pig family, she was no bigger than a puppy. Léa had always had a soft spot for pigs, as she did for wolves and crows—all of them unloved, misunderstood,

and unclassifiable animals. Pigs were the only non-ruminant animal with cloven hooves, and their intelligence placed them far ahead of dogs and cats and just behind chimpanzees, orangutans, and elephants. Saddled with an unfair reputation for laziness, pigs were actually able to run at nearly thirty miles per hour and swim so well that sailors used to bring them on their sea voyages, knowing that they always headed straight for land in the event of a shipwreck. Their internal organs were so similar to humans' that a sow could host a pregnant woman's embryo during a surgery. If certain religions prohibited the consumption of pork, it was not only for health reasons but because of this disturbing resemblance. And yet ...

Charline looked up at her mistress, who bent down and took her into her arms. The black creature wriggled with happiness, her long, straight tail swishing back and forth, and the tears Léa had been holding back for hours now found their release. "We'll get through this," she said, sobbing. "You'll see. I promise you we'll get through this."

Charline rose up on Léa's forearms and nuzzled her neck with a moist and comforting snout.

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